

Adjournment debate regarding rail services between Clitheroe, Blackburn and Manchester

(Jack Straw, Lab, Blackburn)

10.55 pm

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Lab): Thank you very much for that, Mr Speaker, and for the opportunity you have given me to raise this important local issue of rail services between Clitheroe, Blackburn and Manchester in my first Adjournment debate at least in this century and going back a good part of the previous one.

With the Transport Secretary's key announcement earlier this afternoon of the Government's commitment to press ahead with the High Speed 2 line, today will go down as a day of great significance in the development of public transport in the United Kingdom. Of course I welcome that announcement, as I welcomed the earlier announcements to extend electrification to the Manchester-Liverpool and Manchester-Preston rail corridors. HS2 will not, however, be completed until at least 2026, and the north-west electrification schemes will not be completed until at least 2016. So this evening I want to make the case for the pressing and much more immediate improvements needed in the north-south rail services from Clitheroe, which run through Blackburn and Darwen, and into Manchester. I also want to seek the advice and guidance of the Minister on how we can break out of an apparent Catch-22 that is in the way of those improvements, whose benefits for existing and future rail passengers, and for the wider economy of east Lancashire and the north-west, will, we believe, be significant.

The campaign for improvement in the services is supported by all the Members of Parliament for the area, all the political parties and all the local authorities affected. My constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), is in his place and will speak immediately after me, and the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) would be vocal in his support for this cause but for the fact that, as a Deputy Speaker, he can take no part in debates.

Let me set the scene. Rail services in our area run east-west and north-south, with the main interchange being at Blackburn. When I became its Member of Parliament in 1979, these services in east Lancashire were, like those elsewhere, in the shadow of Dr Beeching's axe, and they were in a process of what appeared to be terminal decline. Some lines had been closed altogether or had had their passenger services ended. On other lines, double tracking had been replaced by single tracks, and service frequencies had been greatly reduced—that is the fundamental problem on the line under consideration.

In the 33 years since I became an MP, there have been some significant improvements in rail services. In the early 1980s, the Copy Pit line to west Yorkshire was reopened for passenger services. There is now an hourly fast service across the Pennines that, combined with a local stopping service to Colne, gives a half hourly east-west service throughout the day. In 1994,

following a great campaign by rail groups in the Ribble Valley, with the support of the MP for that constituency and the county council and district councils, passenger services and stations from Clitheroe to Blackburn were reinstated. The new service has proved immensely popular.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 152

Significant sums have been spent on station improvements. In 2000, Railtrack replaced the old and decaying train shed at Blackburn station with well-designed new station facilities, which were part of a £5 million regeneration project. That set of improvements has been augmented in the past few months by new buildings on platform 4 at Blackburn station, which were made necessary by the increased demand for rail services on both the east-west and north-south lines. Much needed improvements at Darwen station will be completed in April and regional growth fund moneys for the Todmorden curve, enabling direct services from Burnley to Manchester, have just been agreed.

Office of Rail Regulation data show that there has been a 90% increase in rail travel within the north-west in the 12 years from 1995-96 to 2007-08, exceeding by 20 percentage points the overall growth in all rail passenger journeys in Great Britain over the same period. The data also show that east Lancashire has been part of that extraordinary growth in local rail services in the north-west. There has been a 27% increase to 1.2 million in the number of passengers going through Blackburn station a year in the five years from 2004-05 to 2009-10 and an astonishing 46% increase in the number of passengers going through Darwen railway station, which is now 250,000 a year.

Overall, the north-south Clitheroe to Manchester line is forecast to be used by 1.7 million passengers this financial year, the highest patronage ever enjoyed by the route. The service developments that are already taking place at Manchester Victoria will put more stress on the service as connections become even easier to a larger range of destinations, including Manchester airport.

The irony is that alongside that catalogue of significant improvements, the one service that cannot be significantly improved at the moment is the line under consideration. The reason is very simple: the track between Blackburn and Bolton was singled in the 1960s. The result is that the maximum level of service that is possible to run on that line is that run today—basically, an hourly service with a half hourly service in the morning and evening peaks. Even maintaining that pattern of service is difficult as, because of the long sections of single track, delays become amplified, sometimes throughout the day. Overcrowding on the services can be intense, as all of us who use it can bear witness, and the quality of the rolling stock is poor on the whole—it is made up of the old Pacers and Sprinters of the 1970s and 1980s—despite the best efforts of Northern Rail, the train operating company. Essentially, other areas' cast-offs are “cascaded” —I think that is the polite term—as new stock is brought in not in east Lancashire but elsewhere.

The solution to that systemically unsatisfactory situation is obvious: to double track some, although not all, of the line between Blackburn and Bolton, to lengthen trains and to improve

the quality of the rolling stock. A great deal of technical work has been undertaken already on the key issue of doubling the track. The north-west rail utilisation strategy for 2007 put the “anticipated cost” of the necessary infrastructure improvement at “over £20 million”.

The consultants commissioned by the local authorities, Faber Maunsell, concluded in their 2007 report that a

“positive business case is achievable for some of the options”

under consideration. That said, the scheme has not so far scored highly enough on the standard cost-benefit analysis tools to feature in Network Rail’s confirmed

10 Jan 2012 : Column 153

investment programmes. The frustration that we all feel—the Catch 22—is that we know as a fact that there has been a huge increase in ridership even given the less than satisfactory frequency, reliability and comfort of the current service and we are convinced that pretty modest improvements in the scale of things would enable there to be dramatic improvements in reliability, frequency and ridership, with major benefits to the local economy. We see proposals elsewhere in the region and in the country whose intrinsic benefits appear to be no greater being more successful in the competition for funds, yet the formulae used do not appear satisfactorily to capture the economic and social benefits that we are sure will accrue from this investment. So, we look forward with optimism and anticipation to the advice from the Minister on how we can break away from the circular trap we are in and progress this scheme.

11.4 pm

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Let me start by congratulating the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) on securing this very important Adjournment debate, which is vital to his constituency and mine. The railway link between Manchester, Darwen and Blackburn needs to be improved. As we have heard, the current service is infrequent and suffers from chronic overcrowding. Despite those problems, it is heavily used. Indeed, I was astounded to learn that there has been a 46% increase in the number of people catching the train from Darwen into Manchester in the past five years.

This evening, the right hon. Gentleman and I ask the Minister for advice on how we can proceed as local MPs in partnership with our local authorities and on a cross-party basis to achieve the doubling of parts of the line between Darwen and Bolton so that we can have a regular half-hourly service that is reliable not only at rush hour but throughout the day. Other works will also be required to improve the service, including the lengthening of platforms to enable longer trains to ease the chronic overcrowding problems. In terms of public infrastructure, the improvements we seek are relatively affordable. Independent estimates have costed them at around £20 million.

I do not want you to think that this is just the Jake and Jack line, Mr Speaker. Improvements would also benefit many other hon. Members of the House and would help residents in Salford, Bolton, Darwen, Blackburn and Clitheroe. My major concern is the Darwen

dividend, as the local MP, and I want improvements in the line for my constituents. I draw the Minister's attention to the overwhelming demand for an improved service, which has already been demonstrated by the increased use. Clearly, demand already exists.

Why is the improvement we seek necessary? Even with the current overcrowded and often unreliable service, 10% of the borough's work force from Blackburn and Darwen commute to Greater Manchester to work. As a Liverpudlian, it pains me greatly to admit that Manchester is the north-west's superpower, but unfortunately I have to say that that is correct. Independent estimates suggest that about 60,000 new jobs will be created in Greater Manchester over the next 10 years. That jobs and growth dividend must be shared across Blackburn and Darwen, with my constituents, and across the entire borough. We want this growth dividend in east Lancashire, which has some deprived areas. We need it. Some of the growth in jobs and industry will be linked to MediaCity, and the

10 Jan 2012 : Column 154

line we are discussing is vital to servicing that development. It passes through Salford Central, which is the nearest station to MediaCity.

Why would people in east Lancashire want to go to Manchester for jobs? It is simply about economics. People who work in Manchester are more highly paid than people who have a job within the borough. If we want those high salaries to be brought back into our borough by people bringing their money home at the end of the day to spend in our local economy, we need a regular rail service and a rail link that can be relied on. That, I hope, will be the Darwen dividend for growth.

Finally, I urge the Minister to take a close look at the scheme. As I have said, it is affordable and the cost would be outweighed by the social, economic and leisure benefits for all the residents of east Lancashire. We are in a unique position in that our roads are among the most clogged up in the country. Indeed, the M66 was identified in the latest edition of *The Sunday Times* as the most congested road in Britain. We rely on our rail system and we need it to be improved. I hope the Minister will give that point some consideration.

11.9 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I start by congratulating the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) on securing this debate on, as he says, a very auspicious day for the rail network in the United Kingdom. While the focus for many today has been on the big project, which is going to be high-speed rail, it is also very important to continue to improve services on our existing rail network, including local services of the sort that we have been discussing this evening. I know how much importance the right hon. Gentleman places on that, as do the other hon. Members who are present today and want to make their arguments heard.

The Government fully appreciate the economic benefits that improving our transport system can generate. That is why we have placed a priority on improving our rail network, even though our budgets are limited due to the need to deal with the deficit. So as well as going ahead with high-speed rail, we have embarked on the biggest programme of rail

improvements to our existing network since the Victorian era, and that ambitious programme includes a number of very important projects in the north-west, which I may have time to cover briefly at the end if time allows.

We recognise that capacity has been an issue for a considerable time on commuter train services into Manchester, including services from Clitheroe and Blackburn. The passenger growth figures that the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) have referred to are indeed striking, and that pattern is reflected on many other parts of the rail network, which is why we have undertaken the programme of capacity expansion that we have. It was welcome news, therefore, when funding for the HLOS—high-level output specification—programme of additional carriages on the whole network was confirmed by the Chancellor in the comprehensive spending review. That programme included extra carriages for the Clitheroe-Blackburn-Manchester line. Since July 2010, three of the seven peak services on that route have been lengthened, providing a 20% increase in the number of seats, and platforms have been lengthened at four stations.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 155

I recognise, however, as do the Government, the local support for other proposals to improve rail services between east Lancashire and Manchester. We recognise the support for the half-hour all day service from Blackburn to Manchester, which many have expressed support for and which is under discussion tonight. That is why the Department for Transport has engaged at considerable length with Blackburn with Darwen council, Burnley borough council and Lancashire county council on finding a way to deliver the service improvements that those local authorities and the local communities want.

I have been asked this evening to give advice on taking forward an improvement programme. The first stage has already been achieved—obtaining the support of the relevant local authorities. It is only when a commitment is made by the local authorities to prioritise these things locally that they have any chance of getting off the ground. It has become clear over recent years that rail service improvements between east Lancashire and Manchester have become a high priority locally, and the work that the councils have commissioned from Network Rail to carry out studies as part of their GRIP—governance for rail investment—process to identify infrastructure requirements is another important precondition for a credible proposal to enhance infrastructure and services. So again we are seeing this process being taken very seriously and important steps being taken, which are essential if there is to be a successful conclusion along the lines that the right hon. Member for Blackburn would like.

The local authorities, I understand, have also been working with Northern Rail to carry out demand forecasting and to estimate operating costs. That kind of foresight and commitment from local authorities has meant that they have been able to take advantage of some of the funding opportunities that have emerged over the last couple of years in relation to east Lancashire services. The most striking example of that has already been mentioned this evening: subject to due diligence, Burnley borough council has secured the funding from the regional growth fund for the Todmorden curve to enable through trains to run between

Accrington, Burnley and Manchester. That will provide a considerable boost for regeneration of the Weavers Triangle area, as well as important benefits for businesses and for commuters to access those important job opportunities in Manchester, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen addressed the House. I congratulate the borough and county councils on their success. That demonstrates that such projects can get off the ground if the right work is done.

The Clitheroe-Blackburn-Manchester line currently has an hourly service. We have heard this evening that there is concern locally that that is not frequent enough. It is supplemented by additional services at peak times between Blackburn and Manchester. I am aware that introducing at least a half-hourly service to Blackburn throughout the day is supported by Blackburn with Darwen council, Lancashire county council and Transport for Greater Manchester, as well as right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken this evening.

As we have also heard, much of the route between Blackburn and Bolton is single track. That means that infrastructure improvements would need to be delivered

10 Jan 2012 : Column 156

if a reliable half-hourly service were to be introduced in both directions throughout the day.

My hon. Friend mentioned the idea of doubling the line. Network Rail concluded that a longer passing loop at Darwen and an increase in line speed capability at Turton crossing were the appropriate improvements, and work is going on to establish how much they are likely to cost.

Since this is a service generating primarily local benefits, it is for the local authority to identify a funding source for the investment needed to make it possible, but one possible source of funding would be the next major local transport schemes budget. This is the kind of project for which it is well worth putting forward a bid to that funding stream. Consistent with our wider localism agenda, we are currently considering how we might enlarge the participation of local and sub-national bodies in the decisions that are taken on how to allocate that major local transport fund, and we continue to engage with key stakeholders on our proposals. We will give further information shortly about the whole major local scheme that we envisage working in the future. We hope that there will be a bigger say for the local and regional stakeholders in the decisions.

If the proposal to introduce half-hourly services on the line were awarded funding under this budget, I am advised that a scheme could conceivably be implemented by December 2016, which might tie in well with the north-west electrification programme and the Ordsall Chord, which we expect to have been completed by that date. Consistent with the approach taken by the previous Government, if additional off-peak services require an ongoing subsidy, that would need to be funded by the local authorities for at least the first three years of operation.

It is not clear whether in the long term these services would require additional subsidy, but many such local services tend to require subsidy, certainly in the early years. If the additional services continued to demonstrate a good business case after a three-year period of local subsidy, the Government would consider funding them if funds are available. The local

authorities will need to look at that to identify the funding to subsidise for three years any enhanced service that they seek to take forward.

As a further relevant matter, I should mention that we plan soon to issue a consultation document on the decentralisation of decision making in relation to our railways generally. This could provide an opportunity for local authorities and PTEs to have a greater say in policy and decisions on local rail services, such as the Clitheroe-Blackburn-Manchester service. Decisions on this obviously await the consultation and its outcome, but services such as the ones that we have been discussing might be appropriate for devolution to a local body, playing a bigger role in relation to important aspects of the rail service and how the subsidy of those services is allocated within a particular area. But even without further devolution, a process is in place that could enable local authorities to take a scheme forward to enhance the Clitheroe to Manchester service. It does mean that they may have to make choices about whether the scheme is a higher priority than other transport choices in their area, but I can assure the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend that we will continue to provide help and advice to the local authorities as they work with the rail industry further to develop the scheme and identify the funding needed if it is to go forward.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 157

I want to put this debate in the context of the Government's wider improvements to rail in the north-west. In 2010, as the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, we confirmed the electrification of the so-called north-west triangle of routes, namely Manchester to Liverpool, Liverpool to Wigan North Western and Manchester to Preston via Bolton. This programme of electrification will result in faster journey times on these routes. The first stage, between Manchester and Earlestown, is due to be completed by December 2013, and the whole scheme should be finished by December 2016.

In March 2011, the Chancellor announced the go-ahead for a major element of the northern hub package—the construction of the Ordsall Chord. This important stretch of new line will enable trains from Manchester airport to Leeds and the north-east to serve Manchester Victoria alongside trains from Liverpool, which will be diverted from their present route to operate via the more direct Chat Moss route. This will substantially reduce journey times between Manchester and Leeds and release capacity at Piccadilly station for additional services from the south and east of the city. All those measures should help to open up job opportunities in the way that my hon. Friend referred to and enable more people to take advantage of the economic vitality of Manchester.

In his autumn statement the Chancellor announced that the route between Manchester, Leeds and York would be electrified. This announcement, coupled with the Ordsall Chord and a programme of other line speed improvements already funded, will cut journey times between Liverpool and Newcastle by up to 45 minutes. We believe that those improvements will deliver significant

10 Jan 2012 : Column 158

benefits across the north of England, particularly in the north-west, revitalising the

Manchester economy to the benefit of the surrounding areas, including, of course, east Lancashire.

As well as cutting journey times and reducing costs, the improvements that we have announced and our programme of electrification will release diesel trains for use elsewhere on the network, making expansion of services on other lines easier to deliver. We will be considering further improvements to our railways in the north of England and other elements of the northern hub package in the high level output specification, which we will be publishing in the summer, on improvements that can be funded by the Government between 2014 and 2019. In the meantime, Network Rail is undertaking further development work on each element of the package to establish with greater clarity how much they would cost and to gauge the strength of the business case.

Our priority is to reduce the budget deficit, but we fully recognise the need to invest in improving our transport network, because of the regeneration and job opportunities that it can deliver. We are also pressing forward with a programme of reform on our railways so that we can reduce the cost of running them to give better value for money for taxpayers and fare payers, and also make it more realistic and viable to deliver the kind of improvements to services that hon. Members have called for tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 pm

House adjourned.